

Washington - Congresswoman Linda Sánchez, Chairwoman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law, issued the following statement as part of the House Judiciary Committee's oversight hearing into the Bush Administration's mass firing of U.S. Attorneys with Monica Goodling, former Senior Counsel to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and Justice Department Liaison with the White House.

The start of the 110th Congress came with the promise that our new leadership would exercise real oversight on the Bush Administration for the first time since it came to power.

With leaders like Chairman John Conyers, Congress is committed to doing the job given to us in the Constitution, which includes providing checks against a potential expansion of executive power that would threaten the very health of our democracy.

While this Congress takes that lofty responsibility very seriously, the origins of this investigation were more mundane. Following the unprecedented mass firing of seven U.S. Attorneys in December 2006, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law began to consider legislation by my colleague Congressman Howard Berman that would close a quietly inserted loophole in the USA Patriot Act that allowed the Attorney General to bypass Senate confirmation in appointing indefinite replacements for U.S. Attorneys. Initial research into the matter indicated that some of these prosecutors may have been fired for refusing to make prosecutorial decisions based on partisan considerations.

The House Judiciary Committee then began this investigation to answer two fundamental questions: Who made the decision to fire these federal prosecutors, and why were these prosecutors targeted?

In the months since, we have learned through interviews, evidence review, and media reports that some U.S. Attorneys may have been pressured by local party leaders and Members of Congress to pursue or cease public corruption cases. We have learned that the White House initiated the plan to mass fire U.S. Attorneys and had an undetermined role in the development of the firing list. We have also learned that the Attorney General signed a secret order giving unprecedented personnel decision-making power to two junior aides, including Ms. Goodling, as well questionable hiring and policy priorities in other Justice Department divisions.

The implications of these findings are chilling. At best, we have a Justice Department plagued by rampant cronyism and reckless managerial dereliction. At worst, we may have uncovered a systematic campaign to use the American system of justice for the simple purpose of helping one party win elections.

That is why we are having this hearing - to get to the truth.

After numerous interviews and extensive review of thousands of pages of documents, the Bush Administration has not yet provided clear and credible answers to our two fundamental questions. We have talked to almost every senior Justice Department official who was or

should have been involved in the plan to fire U.S. Attorneys, and none can recall or take responsibility for the development of the firing list.

Monica Goodling, former Senior Counsel to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and the Justice Department's White House liaison, is the last remaining senior Justice Department official to testify, and she should be able to offer a unique insight into this matter. In addition to her unprecedented authority over personnel decisions, interviews with Justice Department officials and released documents also indicate that Ms. Goodling had a central role in coordinating the mass firings with the White House.

Ms. Goodling's testimony is necessary and relevant. After initially trying to invoke her Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination, this Committee passed - with broad bipartisan support - an offer of immunity which has compelled her to testify before us today.

I hope that she can shed light on why the Bush Administration gave inexperienced and ideological neophytes unprecedented authority to hire and fire Justice Department personnel, as well as provide information on the development of the list of at least nine U.S. Attorneys that were eventually fired.

There is no overstating the importance of this investigation. Contrary to the criticism of some, this Committee is not interested in partisan grandstanding. And while we regard perjury as a serious offense that warrants accountability, we are not playing a game of testimony "gotcha."

We are here today because the prospect that partisan motivations are driving our justice system poses a critical threat to the health of our democracy.

Simply put, the American people need to know that they will not be arrested or prosecuted for the sole reason of helping any political party win elections.

We have seen several troubling developments since this investigation began. At least four senior Justice Department officials have resigned in the wake of the U.S. Attorney firings, including Ms. Goodling. The Justice Department and the White House have each launched internal investigations.

Most troubling, however, were the recent statements by two former U.S. Attorneys - professional prosecutors - whose expertise leads them to believe that there will be criminal charges as a result of the firings.

I hope this investigation discovers nothing more nefarious than simple managerial incompetence. Frankly, the alternatives would be deeply disturbing signs about the health of our justice system and our democracy.

I hope that Ms. Goodling can provide clear and credible answers today that alleviate these concerns. If, however, this hearing continues the trend of selective memory and evasive testimony, this Committee will be forced to focus outside the Justice Department in its search for answers.